

State School Readiness Board Summary of Priority Recommendations

Why School Readiness?

Groundbreaking research on the development of the brain emphasizes the importance of ensuring that children have access to quality early care and education experiences. High quality early care and education is one of the most effective strategies to ensure children begin school with the skills they need to succeed and is associated with higher reading skills, better test scores and less behavioral problems. Many of Arizona's children spend 35 to 40 hours per week in out-of-home care. The quality, accessibility and affordability of that care should be one of Arizona's top priorities. Numerous studies have shown that quality early learning experiences can have a lasting positive impact throughout a child's entire education.ⁱ

Not only does the quality of Arizona's early care and education system have a direct impact on the long-term educational success of Arizona's children, it has a direct impact on the development of a workforce to meet the challenges of tomorrow's economy. Business and community leaders throughout the State understand the importance of quality early care and education and are motivated to bring their leadership and resources to build a stronger system for Arizona.

1. Provide family support and parent education programs that strengthen families and promote school readiness. [Health Recommendation No. 32]

Parents and families are key to school readiness because the best time for language development is the first three years of life when 90% of a child's brain is developed. However, many parents and families need additional support to help them understand how to best promote their child's healthy development and readiness for school.

The SRB recommends that the State support culturally sensitive community-based efforts to provide families with literacy skills, to provide families with information about early brain development, and to inform the public through libraries the media and marketing campaigns about the importance of quality early education and the role that parents and families play.

The SRB also recommends that the State continue to fund strength-based parenting programs and expand the availability of those programs, including programs such as: 1) Healthy Families, which is a voluntary program to help parents understand child development, promote health, and prevent child abuse and neglect, and 2) Family Literacy, which is a family-centered education program that provides ESL and GED preparation for adults, as well as developmentally appropriate activities and curriculum for children under eight years old. Each of these programs is available to less than 8% of the families who qualify.

2. Ensure that health care providers who work with children and early care and education providers have knowledge of child and early brain development, comprehensive health screening, early intervention, and other community resources. [Health Recommendations No. 30].

Early diagnosis of health problems can prevent years of learning delays. The SRB recommends that a plan be developed to ensure that children are screened for health problems prior to entering preschool and kindergarten so that hearing, vision, behavioral health, and developmental issues are identified early on.

Specifically, the SRB recommends that AHCCCS increase the number of children who have well-child (EPSDT health screening) visits for children age fifteen months and three through six year olds; that health plans refer children who are at risk for significant developmental delays to the Arizona Early Intervention Program (AZEIP); that pediatricians and family practitioners are trained to conduct developmental assessments; that other professionals who work with children are trained to screen children to identify behavioral health issues and potential developmental delays; and that a health consultation system be designed and implemented making health professionals accessible to early care and education providers. The SRB should also work with state agencies and others to determine how to remove barriers that may prevent children from enrolling in KidsCare.

3. Ensure access to quality early care and education in the setting of the family's choice for all children birth through kindergarten. [Quality and Cost Recommendation No. 13]

Research on brain development scientifically demonstrates how important the first years of life are to a child's later development and readiness for school. The SRB recommends that the state identify and adopt strategies for increasing the availability of quality out-of-home early care and education for infants and toddlers. This should include building on existing efforts to support Kith & Kin programs and family child care with technical assistance in key areas including curriculum development, child development, and business operations.

The SRB recommends that high quality state-supported preschool and child care be phased-in statewide, beginning with children in communities with high levels of poverty. This should build on current efforts that can be expanded by targeting the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) and by providing resources and technical assistance to child care centers to achieve the Arizona Early Childhood Education Standards.

The \$19.4 million Early Childhood Block Grant supports a variety of early education programs, \$3.4 million to full-day kindergarten; \$9.9 million to preschool; and \$5.7 million to K3 supplements. As LEA's (local education agencies) receive funding for full-day kindergarten, the ECBG funds allocated to the LEA for K-3 support or for full-day kindergarten should be re-directed to preschool programs. ECBG funding for full-day kindergarten or K-3 supplements should not be re-directed until the LEA receives formula-funded full-day kindergarten. Additional resources should be identified to expand the availability of quality preschool. As additional resources become available, the SRB recommends changing the law to allow ECBG funds to be allocated via a competitive grant instead of by a formula driven program.

Grants should be targeted to help implement high-quality preschool, beginning in communities with high numbers of children in poverty. The SRB would work with the Early Childhood Division of ADE to evaluate, monitor and allocate grants to ensure that quality standards are integrated into funded programs, to promote availability of full-day, full year care, and to ensure Head Start and child care is included. The SRB would also work with the Early Childhood Division of ADE and DES to build on available resources to assist child care centers with technical assistance and quality enhancement grants to help centers achieve standards related to staff-to-child ratios, teacher qualifications and wages, curriculum and materials.

To further promote quality early care and education, the SRB recommends that the State target current and additional resources to child care providers that meet higher standards. To target current resources, the State can phase-in providing DES child care subsidies via competitive contracts in addition to vouchers, thereby ensuring child care providers receive a consistent level of funding. Centers are currently reimbursed based on attendance of the child, making funding unpredictable.

4. Increase the pool and retention of qualified early care and education professionals and thereby, the quality of early care and education in Arizona. [Professional Development Recommendations No. 1 & 10]

Research shows that teacher education and turnover rates affect children's development, and low wages are often what cause teachers to leave the field. Arizona early care and education teachers earn a median hourly wage of \$8.00, and 30% of lead teachers remain in their job one year or less.ⁱⁱ Some states have improved the quality of their early care and education workforce by providing professional development incentives such as scholarship programs, wage programs and health benefits. Research has shown that by offering and having access to professional development, early care and education worker turnover decreases and the quality of teaching for young children improves.

In 2003 and 2004 the SRB will build on the current professional development system including the S*CCEEDS Professional Development Registry through a \$1.6 million 2-year Early Childhood Professional Development Educator Grant from the United States Department of Education awarded to Arizona State University and the Governor's Office. This grant will increase the education and skills of 300 early care and education teachers and community college students and 25 graduate students or mentors in five identified counties: Apache, Navajo, Maricopa (Alhambra, Balz, Isaac, Murphy, Roosevelt school districts), Pinal, and Pima.

The SRB also recommends that a plan be developed for phasing in incentives to improve the retention and quality of early care and education teachers. These incentives could include scholarship programs (similar to the T.E.A.C.H. program that has been successful in North Carolina), and wage and health benefit programs. The State should consider the possible use of Workforce Investment Act funding towards these programs.

5. Utilize the Arizona State School Readiness Board to improve coordination within the early care and education system. [Program Coordination Recommendations No. 24 & 26]

Early care and education functions are currently spread among multiple state, tribal and local agencies and there is no state-level body that has authority to promote coordination concerning health, family support, literacy, parent education and other programs that promote school readiness. In fact, programs within the state agencies, tribes, and federal Head Start have different program requirements (i.e.: eligibility levels, staff qualifications, standards, reporting requirements) that are not coordinated with each other. Funding comes from multiple state and federal sources with little coordination on programs and funding.

The SRB should be utilized to improve inter-agency and program coordination. The SRB recommends that the relevant state agencies work with the SRB to develop plans for potential administrative consolidation and fund maximization. This would include developing a strategic plan targeted at maximizing and making more efficient and effective the use of the following child care funding sources: Arizona's quality set aside and federal monies from the Child Care Development Fund administered by the Department of Economic Security; the Early Childhood Block Grant which are state monies administered by the Arizona Department of Education; the Child Care Food Program, which are federal monies administered by the Arizona Department of Education; and child care licensing monies which are state monies utilized by the Arizona Department of Health for child care licensing. In addition, the School Readiness Indicators Project, begun by the Children's Action Alliance, should be incorporated into performance measures of both child-centered outcomes and process outcomes realized through improved system coordination.

Finally, the SRB recommends that it be empowered either via legislation or executive order to take on this coordination role and be charged with creating a detailed annual plan to advance the goals of building a quality early care and education system in Arizona.

6. Improve regulation of child care and thereby the quality of early care and education programs [Quality and Cost Recommendation No. 16]

Arizona's current child care system does not ensure that parents know their children are being placed in quality settings. The current system regulates for health and safety standards and DES pays some incentives to child care centers that achieve certain national accreditation. However, there is no overall system in Arizona that regulates the quality of child care, nor is there a quality rating system for child care centers. And, child care licensing and child care subsidies are currently housed in different state agencies, with insufficient focus on improving the quality of child care and maximizing resources.

The SRB recommends that Arizona move towards a quality rating system that will give parents the information they need to ensure their children are in quality care. A detailed plan should be developed to improve standards of child care centers and provide higher payments to providers who meet those standards. Part of this plan must be to ensure that adequate resources are available to support increased quality without decreasing availability or increasing costs to families. There should also be an analysis of additional staff that might be needed to adequately monitor currently licensed programs.

7. Provide adequate funding for child care subsidies at a level that promotes quality early care and education. [Quality and Cost Recommendation No. 15]

The Arizona median cost of full-time center-based child care is approximately \$6,000 per year. To assist families who earn low wages, DES provides payment for child care for children of poor families who have incomes up to 165% of FPL (\$25,179 for a family of 3 or \$12.20/hr), as well as families on TANF or transitioning off TANF and children in the CPS system. It is estimated that in SFY 04 an average of 37,300 children per month will receive subsidies. Child care subsidies allow families to afford child care and can allow providers to improve the quality of care. The SRB recommends that the state identify adequate financial resources to support full demand for child care.

8. Identify and pursue new sources of dedicated funding for Arizona's early care and education system. [Quality and Cost Recommendation No. 23]

The State currently does not have sufficient public or private resources to build a system that provides high-quality early care and education for children and new sources of revenue need to be developed.

The SRB recommends that the State identify potential sources of revenue from the recommendations of the Citizens Finance Review Commission. In addition, the SRB recommends that an Arizona Early Education Fund be set up as a private fund to accept private dollars from businesses and foundations that are recognizing the need for quality early care and education. The private Fund could be used to help build the local and community level systems via a competitive grant process for: (1) capacity and infrastructure grants that target the needs of individual communities; (2) quality improvement grants; (3) grants to improve teacher quality through scholarships, wage and health benefit programs. By making the grants competitive, the Fund could be used to help incentivize communities to maximize funds at the local level and create comprehensive community assessments. The Fund could also be used to leverage federal and private grant dollars

9. Dedicate funding and phase-in developmentally appropriate full day kindergarten for all children, beginning in communities with high numbers of children in the free and reduced price lunch program. [Quality and Cost Recommendation No. 14]

Children who attend full-day kindergarten are better prepared to succeed in first grade and beyond.ⁱⁱⁱ For children of working parents, full-day programs limit the number of transitions a child must make during a day, reducing child and parental stress. Research has demonstrated that full-day kindergarten can lower grade retention, improve language and math skills, lead to higher achievement test scores in eighth grade, and improve attendance and social skills.^{iv} Full-day kindergarten must be developmentally appropriate so that it is not overly academically focused or solely playtime. Teachers should be appropriately educated and compensated, and receive adequate training on best practices.

School districts have pieced together varied state and federal funding streams to pay for full day kindergarten, including the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG), K-3 overrides, Title 1 funds, and parental fees. The SRB recommends that full-day kindergarten be phased-in through the school funding formula so that kindergarten children count as “1” instead of “1/2” for funding including facility allocations utilized by the School Facilities Board. Full-day kindergarten should be phased-in based on the number of children eligible for free/reduced lunch taking into account student achievement data and the LEA’s (local education agency’s) capability to implement full-day kindergarten. Only when LEAs receive funds for full-day kindergarten through the funding formula, will ECBG dollars be re-directed to preschool.

ⁱ [Campbell, F.A., Ramey, C.T., Pungello, E.P., Sparling, J., and Miller-Johnson, S. (2002). “Early Childhood Education: Young Adult Outcomes from the Abecedarian Project”. Applied Developmental Science, 6:42-57; Schweinhart, L.J., Barnes, H.V., and Weikart, D.P. (1993). “Significant benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 27” Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 10). Ypsilanti: High/Scope Press; Reynolds, A and Stevens, P. (2002) The Chicago Longitudinal Study, University of Wisconsin-Madison.]

ⁱⁱ Maricopa County Office of Research and Reporting. (2001). Arizona Wage and Benefit Survey of Child Care/Early Childhood Education Center Based Personnel.

ⁱⁱⁱ Miller, Amanda. (2002). Full-Day Kindergarten, ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Child Education.

^{iv} Peisner-Feinberg, E.S., Burchinal, M.R., Clifford, R.M., Culkin, M.L., Howes, C., Kagan, S.L., Yazejian, N., Byler, P., Rustici, J., Zelazo, J. (2000). The Children of the Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study Go To School: Technical Report, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center.